

Hello, and welcome to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument's Ranger Minute. In today's episode we are going to talk about one of the most common plants found out here in the Sonoran Desert the Chain-Fruit Cholla. Now this plant is also known by another name: the Jumping Cholla. And it gets that name because a lot of people believe that this plant will jump out at you and imbed its spines into your arms and into your legs. But that's really not what goes on, as we all know plants can't jump out at you. So what is the story behind the name Jumping Cholla? Well, in order to tell the story, I am going to use the help of an aid, I am going to use this pen that has a softer end on it to show you exactly where it gets the name Jumping Cholla. Now if you look close, you will be able to see just how easily these spines and these segments come off with just the slightest touch.

Did you notice how easily this segment of cactus attached itself to my pen? That's how this cactus gets the name Jumping Cholla, because it can just as easily attach itself to you. Now you might be asking how does the cactus do that, and why does it do it? Well the how is because of the special design of this cactus. The first part of the design is simple. These spines are serrated, like a dagger, which means they go in much easier than they come out. And the second part of the design is that these spines are attached in a much stronger way to the cactus than the individual segments of cactus are attached to each other. Now why would a cactus want to do that? Why would a cactus purposely want to lose part of itself in the desert? And the answer to that is simple. This is the main way in which cholla cactus reproduce. Yes, they can reproduce through seeds, but it is much easier just to attach a segment of itself to an animal like a javelina, or a rabbit, or a skunk, or a coyote, and have that animal carry it across the desert until it finally knocks it off some place to the side. And once it knocks it off, if there is rain in the next couple days this cactus has just replanted itself. And that can happen 365 days a year, whereas seeds are only viable for a much shorter period of time.

And in this story, in this how and the why, is one of the secrets of the desert. Spines on cactus aren't always about protection. Quite often they are about something much more simple: like reproduction or shade. And that is today's Ranger Minute.